International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-4; Jul-Aug, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

A Comparative Analysis of Mental Health, Nature, and Sustainable Well-being through the Lens of Fredrik Backman

A Positive Psychology and Psychoanalytic Reading

Ridhima[1], Dr Kirti Jha[2]

[1]Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Department of Development Studies, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
ORCID ID- 0009-0006-6959-4419
[2]Research Supervisor, Department of Development Studies, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
ORCID ID- 0000-0002-2386-3680

Received: 16 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 13 Aug 2026; Accepted: 17 Aug 2026; Available online: 21 Aug 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract— *This paper provides a comparative literary analysis of four novels by Swedish author Fredrik Backman: A Man Called Ove (2014), My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry (2015), Britt-Marie Was Here (2016) and Anxious People (2020) all of which depict mental well-being, human relationships and sustainable well-being. Although Backman is a multimillion-selling, internationally translated author, his fiction has received relatively little sustained academic attention, especially in terms of its psychological aspects. Two complementary theoretical frameworks are used in this study to highlight the unconscious processes and defence mechanisms in characters' experiences of grief, anxiety, and depression, and the strengths-based, future-focused processes they undergo to become more flourishing. Two complementary theoretical lenses are used in this study: Freudian psychoanalytic theory to highlight the unconscious processes and defence mechanisms in characters' experiences of grief, anxiety, and depression; and positive psychology to highlight the strengths-based, future-focused pathways through which characters move toward flourishing. This study employs a qualitative thematic content analysis to explore the similarities and differences in the themes that emerged from the four books: psychological disturbance protected against in various ways, displacement, reaction formation and sublimation of loss; psychological recovery that happens at the level of flow-inducing engagement, strengths of the characters, and making meaning; and the strong consistency of the story arc, one in which the individual flourishes through, and not apart from, the giving up of isolation in favor of collective life. Finally, the implications for literary study and the ways in which popular fiction models the beginnings of psychological suffering and the routes to psychological success are considered.*

Keywords— ***Fredrik Backman, Mental Health, Sustainable Well-being, Positive Psychology, Psychoanalytic Theory.***

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2012 A Man Called Ove caught on in countries around the world (2014 English edition), and now the Swedish author Fredrik Backman ranks among the top selling book writers of the last decade, with over 40 translations of his novels. Readers and critics alike praise Backman's fiction as a tale of heartwarming characters, vitriol-filled protagonists and fragile, lonely individuals who are transformed from isolation into a community of neighbors, strangers and children. Under this superficially charming and comforting layer, however, Backman's novels consistently portray serious psychological themes, such as suicidal thinking in A Man Called Ove (Backman, 2014), the loss of a cherished member of the family and the resulting grief in My

Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry (Backman, 2015), depression and isolation in Britt-Marie Was Here (Backman, 2016), and overall anxiety, panic and family disunity in Anxious People (Backman, 2020).

Although his fiction has been commercially successful, academic literary criticism on the books has not been extensive compared to that of many award-winning literary writers and to date, there has been little research that specifically examines his novels using a psychoanalytical framework and/or a positive psychology lens. This divide is striking, given that the two traditions have time-honored roots, but complementary methods to read through the written accounts of psychological distress and recovery of fiction. The psychoanalytical theories developed by Sigmund Freud offer a depth-based explanation of the influence of unconscious conflict, grievances and defense mechanisms on behavior (Freud 1923, 1917). Positive psychology, however, has a strengths-based, future-focused perspective on the positive role of engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment for human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2011). They, read together, enable a fuller story of Backman's typical narrative structure, where a character's documented and apparent dissatisfaction with his life is slowly shifted to a more vibrant life in which he is once again engaged and connected with others. Studies of Backman's novels in recent years have explored his texts from other angles that also attend to their psychological undercurrents, but none directly to the psychoanalytical or positive-psychological aspects that are the focus of this analysis: Fuller (2025a) examines his fiction through the lenses of heteropessimism and the body, and Fuller (2025b) does so with regard to his depiction of family and motherhood in contestations of Nordic gender equality.

This study aims at this gap by making a thematic analysis of four Backman novels in a comparative, analytical study. The guiding research question is: What are the representations of both the psychoanalytical origins of psychological distress and positive-psychological origins of well-being in Backman's novels and do they correspond to theoretical accounts of each of these processes? A second question would have to be what does the double reading entail about Backman's fiction for a general popular audience.

The study is organised in five additional parts.The remaining part of the study takes the following format. First, it creates a psychological and theoretical model that melds the literary and Freudian psychoanalytical theories with the positive psychology model. Secondly, it describes the qualitative research technique employed. Thirdly, it reports the findings in a way that includes three cross cutting themes. Fourth, it gives a theoretical discussion on these findings. Last but not least, it provides a summary and suggestions for future studies.

II. LITERARY FRAMEWORK

This paper compares and contrasts the two theoretical strands which have been applied to Backman's novels and which are usually regarded as opposing - Freudian psychoanalytic theory and positive psychology - and each is used to analyse the novels on its own.

2.1 Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory

According to Sigmund Freud structural psychological model, mental life in terms of human being is divided into Id, the location of the instincts of desire, Superego, the voice of prohibition of the social and parental life and Ego as a mediator between Id and Superego and external reality (Freud, 1923). The main theoretical concept of this study is Freud's (1917) description of the ways in which grief is expressed; ordinary grief is a progressive and painful process of distancing oneself emotionally from a lost object, while melancholia is characterized by a "reversion to the past effect" (p. 236) wherein grief moves inward and unprocessed. If the work of mourning is not allowed to proceed as it should, Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers propose that the ego implements defense mechanisms to handle the "unbearable affect" that is not consciously processed, such as: repression, displacement, reaction formation, and sublimination (Freud, 1923; A. Freud, 1936). This account of arrested mourning has persisted in contemporary clinical psychiatry, with prolonged grief disorder added to the list of clinical syndromes in the last few years (Smid et al., 2021), and a desire to differentiate adaptive grief work from the defensive and unfinished kind of mourning described by Freud (1917). Finally, Freud's (1930) Civilization and its Discontents addresses the problem of a long-standing balance between individual instinctual desire and renunciations required by communal life, which he proposes is mediated partly by sublimation, the social accommodation of instinctual energy by engaging in something socially valuable, like work, care, or creative endeavor.

2.2 Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a new specialty of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) that is focused on states that facilitate human flourishing, whereas psychoanalysis is focused on the conditions and mechanisms associated with distress. Seligman (2011) argues that there are 5 dimensions of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships,

meaning and accomplishment. In addition, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory on flow is a state of effortless, self-forgetting absorption in an activity which is inherently rewarding and closely related to general well-being. Peterson and Seligman (2004) also suggested that flourishing occurs when people participate in daily life acting out in recognisable ways their gifts and abilities, such as persistence, fairness and kindness. More recent research has tried to expand and test this framework and not simply consider it as an "inventory". This stems from the understanding that, according to Donaldson et al. (2022), well-being is not just about internal psychological factors, but also physical health, mindset, environment, and economic security; hence, the PERMA+4 model was introduced, marking it as a deeper model than the classic one. Positive psychology provides, then, a vocabulary for describing recovery and flourishing as a part of psychoanalytic account of what characters may be recovering from.

Together, these two frameworks offer interpretive scaffolding for the subsequent thematic analysis, which highlights psychoanalytical theory to help see these protagonists' distress in the light of their unconscious origins and their defense mechanisms, as well as the positive psychology to see their distress in the process of their meaning, engagement, and relationships.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is mixed qualitative through literary thematic content analysis method, which is appropriate to identifying patterns of meaning that can be found in literary works that are purposively sampled novels. The sample consisted of four novels written by Fredrik Backman, selected purposively because all four have a protagonist in a state of emotional distress, who have clear journeys towards re-engagement and relationships: A Man Called Ove (2014), My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry (2015), Britt-Marie Was Here (2016) and Anxious People (2020). All four were read in their English translations, which are widely distributed.

Each novel has been read, and conducted in a manual manner, three a priori themes were coded: psychoanalytic (identified through the above mentioned literary framework as grief work, melancholia, displacement, reaction formation, sublimation), positive-psychological (identified through same literary framework above as flow, character strengths, positive psychology's relationships and meaning pillars) and the resolution of individual distress through collective or communal life (Freud's (1930) account of sublimation into civilization, as well as positive psychology's relationships and the meaning columns). The passages were identified and summarized in the researcher's own words within each chapter, used an iterative and comparative approach across the four texts and organized them under sub-themes to follow a standard qualitative thematic analysis procedure.

There are a few constraints provided by this approach which are discussed again below. Literary thematic analysis is always interpretive, however, because different readers would code the same texts differently by assigning different weights and groupings of themes and, especially, by making inferences about the unconscious motivations for which the texts could stand, which are not expressly stated but rather inferred from what is said. Secondly, the analysis is based on an English translation, and so may be some nuances in tone or word meaning lost in the translation. Thirdly, no data on reader's reactions or reader's response were collected, but rather the design analyzed how the story is represented by the text; the types of reader's experience data typically collected in recent research on novels and well-being within the field of fiction-and-well-being research (Currie et al., 2025) was qualitative interview data. Lastly, the four novels could not be expected to sample every work of Backman's; there are other novels, such as the Beartown trilogy, that were not included in the sample and the results are thus representative of this rather than of Backman's entire oeuvre.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Table 1 summarizes the three cross-cutting themes as they appear across the four novels before each theme is discussed in turn.

Table1: Cross-Novel Comparison of Psychoanalytic and Positive Psychology Themes

Novel	Psychoanalytic Reading (Freud)	Positive Psychology Reading	Community / Collective Outcome
A Man Called Ove (2014)	Grief work following spousal loss; rigid routines as reaction formation and displacement defending against mourning	Handiwork and caretaking as flow-inducing engagement; strengths of persistence and fairness expressed through action	Reintegration into neighborhood restores relationships and meaning (PERMA)

My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry (2015)	Childhood mourning processed through fantasy as symbolic wish-fulfillment and sublimation of loss	Storytelling and imaginative play as meaning-making and positive engagement	Elsa extends her grandmother's hidden network of mutual aid
Britt-Marie Was Here (2016)	Obsessive cleanliness as displacement/reaction formation defending against depression after divorce	Football coaching provides accomplishment, engagement, and renewed identity	Community sports program revived; collective morale improves
Anxious People (2020)	Anxiety and crisis read as eruption of repressed despair amid unconscious conflict between desire and social demand	Shared crisis produces positive emotion and new relationships among strangers	Hostages form a lasting support network beyond the crisis

4.2 Psychoanalytic Readings: Grief, Defense, and the Unconscious

In the four novels, Backman's characters demonstrate certain phases of distress which illustrate Freud's (1917) description of mourning and melancholia and the defense mechanisms he developed in 1923 and the later A. Freud's (1936). A Man Called Ove (Backman, 2014) contains a lot of reaction formation and displacement, a way for Ove to replace intolerable grief over his deceased wife with socially acceptable irritability and control, the ways to postpone the necessary and painful processes of the grieving period. Elsa's elaborate fantasy world in My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry (Backman, 2015) is a symbolic sublimation that permits the ego to come to terms with her grandmother's passing and her family's cracks and fissures via acceptable story, rather than face them head-on. In Britt-Marie Was Here (Backman, 2016), Britt-Marie's hyper-cleanness is her reaction formation and her displacement from the depression and collapse of identity that ensued after her divorce, a hyper-cleanness that serves as a means for her to replace the emotional chaos she can't yet articulate. In Anxious People (Backman, 2020), the whole set of the characters' anxiety and the main character's desperate suicidal pitch are a rage of suppressed despair that mirrors Freud's (1930) description of how the strain is caused when instinctual need and social demand are placed in an unsustainable tension.

4.3 Positive Psychology: Engagement, Strengths, and Flourishing

A positive psychology reading helps to clarify the ways in which each character takes steps toward flourishing, while a psychoanalytical reading helps to explain the causes of distress in each of them. As Ove's careful work and attentiveness, essentially defensive, slowly transform into opportunities for flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) – a state of absorbing, intrinsically rewarding engagement – his character strengths of persistence and fairness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) are transformed into renewed purpose. Elsa's storytelling is at times a symptom of unprocessed grief, but also, in this instance, one of the positive-psychological ways of creating meaning, which Seligman (2011) identified as one of five strands of the PERMA model. When coaching a kids' soccer team, Britt-Marie gets a sense of accomplishment and engagement, and it's a sense she's been lacking in her marriage. The crisis that the strangers face together brings out unexpected positive emotions and new relationships in Anxious People, which is a story about how well-being can emerge out of adversity, if it is approached together.

4.4 Community & Civilization: Transition to Collective Life

The people of the community and civilization are the ones who experience the sublimation into their collective life.

A third transversal pattern can be seen as a combination of both: In both the novels, the protagonist's progress from a position of isolation to a position of collective life is finished only by rejecting isolation and embracing collective life, similar to Freud's (1930) description of civilization as the transformation of individual instinct into social and collective life, and the dimensions of relationships and meaning as found in positive psychology (Seligman, 2011). Ove's raising of a young family and larger neighbourhood is a good example of how the loss is shared for the good of all. Elsa carries on her grandmother's covert network of mutual aid, a private symbolic resource that becomes a collective care. Britt-Marie's rejuvenated football team doesn't bring financial success to her alone, but to an entire dying town. In the midst of an emergency that brings them together, the strangers in Anxious People find that they become a group of people that supports each other beyond the emergency itself. For each, personal flourishing and collective belonging are not competing aspirations, but rather co-constitutive.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that, although freudian psychoanalytic theory and positive psychology have opposing convictions, they are complementary rather than conflicting in their interpretation of Backman's fiction. Each protagonist is the subject of an original grievance or loss, which is dealt with in different ways, such as through reaction formation and displacement in the case of grief, symbolizing or sublimating the loss in the case of the protagonists, and the anxiety experienced by each is a way of recognizing and avoiding their conflict between desire and social demand, which is repressed (Freud, 1917, 1923, 1930). Positive psychology speaks to those resources and structures through which that distress is ultimately turned into engagement (flow), the use of character strengths, and Seligman's (2011) model of positive emotion, positive relationship, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment, or PERMA. As each theory stood alone, it would only document portions of Backman's characteristic movement from an uneventful unhappiness to a thriving life, but as they are all read together, they document the entire journey.

The double reading also renders an account of how Freud's (1930) description of civilization is a fruitful connection between the two traditions. In psychoanalytic terms, the notion of individual instinctual satisfaction having to be partially denied and sublimated into collective life is anticipated by Freud, who anticipates the meaning and relationships pillars of well-being in positive psychology. In each of his novels, the bridge is the subject of a dramatic scene in which a protagonist's healing is inextricably linked to the healing of a community, or to the reconstruction of a community. This indicates that in Backman's novels the achievement of flourishing is not a purely internal or individual one, but is also a community effort.

A certain alignment of the two frameworks should yet be recognized. The psychoanalytical interpretation of literature characters is always inferential, because the unconscious motivation is never explicitly expressed in the literary work; and Freud's theoretical framework has been criticized for its ability to test its hypotheses empirically. Positive psychology, on the other hand, has been criticized for its individualistic focus and focus on positive emotions which can cause it to downplay the importance or need for negative emotions and experiences like grief and distress. These are not finalized concerns: Recent conceptual efforts in positive psychology itself have recognized that there is no empirical evidence that the PERMA framework's five factors are always observed in empirical research, and instead that it is a dynamic, contextually extendable theory of well-being (Donaldson et al., 2022). In fact, Backman's novels seem to skirt both constraints: they are not novels of "grief" or "defense," but rather of processes that are essential, not accidental, to the novel; they are certainly not novels of "flourishing" but novels of flourishing, in communal rather than simply individual terms.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has focused on four novels by Fredrik Backman and explored the representation of mental health and sustainable well-being in these novels through a combination of the theoretical approaches of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and positive psychology. It was observed that both distress and its defense, were experienced through displacement, reaction formation and sublimation formation, characteristics of Freud's (1917, 1923) account of mourning and defense, and that recovery occurred through flow, character strengths and the PERMA pillars of well-being, characteristics of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and that there was a persistent narrative structure in which individual flourishing was realized, not rather than in, collective life, as outlined by Freud (1930) in his account on civilization. These results advance the current scant academic literary theories about Backman, which include a multi-disciplinary reading that connects with psychoanalytical and positive psychology approaches, but also provide a claim to their popular success as they dramatise the neededness of grieving and the potential for flourishing.

Future research in this vein could be expanded in a number of ways, however, mostly along empirical, reader-response lines to test whether readers of Backman's novels report psychological benefits that are congruent with either of the two presented frameworks, using a qualitative and/or mixed- methods approach developed for the study of fiction reading and well-being by Currie et al. (2025) and Monroy-Fraustro et al. (2021); comparative analysis which could include the extension of this analysis to the other novels in Backman's “Beartown trilogy” and perhaps to his other novels as well, and finally, translation studies that would investigate whether the psychoanalytical or positive-psychological themes identified here are equally present in the original Swedish novel.

REFERENCES

[1] Backman, F. (2014). A man called Ove (H. Koch, Trans.). Atria Books. (Original work published 2012)
[2] Backman, F. (2015). My grandmother asked me to tell you she's sorry (H. Koch, Trans.). Atria Books. (Original work published 2013)
[3] Backman, F. (2016). Britt-Marie was here (H. Koch, Trans.). Atria Books. (Original work published 2014)
[4] Backman, F. (2020). Anxious people (N. Smith, Trans.). Atria Books. (Original work published 2019)

[5] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row.
[6] Currie, N. K., Wilkinson, K., & McGeown, S. (2025). Reading fiction and psychological well-being during older adulthood: Positive affect, connection and personal growth. Reading Research Quarterly, 60(1), Article e605. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.605
[7] Donaldson, S. I., van Zyl, L. E., & Donaldson, S. I. (2022). PERMA+4: A framework for work-related wellbeing, performance and positive organizational psychology 2.0. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, Article 817244. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.817244
[8] Freud, A. (1936). The ego and the mechanisms of defence. Hogarth Press.
[9] Freud, S. (1917). Mourning and melancholia. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14, pp. 237–258). Hogarth Press.